

The Last Wave

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Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore, so do our minutes hasten to their end.

—William Shakespeare, Sonnet 60

Six a.m., Monday, January 11, 2016. The alarm rips me from dreams of perfect Pipeline. One minute I'm walking on water, wearing nothing but impossibly cool boardies, hula music soundtrack, and the next ... *What the feck?* I fumble for my glasses, blink, focus. Outside it's deepest, darkest winter. Rain lashes the window, like a Ginger Baker drum solo. The wind howls like Jimi's Stratocaster. *No feckin' way.* I close my eyes again. Then I remember: there's a swell today. This is the wild west coast of Ireland, not Hawaii, but surf's up just the same.

As I struggle out of bed, I wonder: will this be my last dawn patrol? The last time I stuff the battered old longboard in the van? The last time I paddle out to greet the first shards of a County Kerry sunrise? I've been thinking about quitting for a while and it scares me to death. Surfing's been my life, along with music. Some people have religion; I had songs, and I'm still a surfaholic. But the last few sessions have been painful.

It's not just the physical pain. Sure, it hurts. It hurts like hell. But hey, you're still alive if it hurts, I tell my broken body after every wipeout. It's not even the fear creeping up on you like a psycho in a scary clown mask. No, what makes me want to quit is the *loathing*—loathing how things are now: punks dropping-in as if I didn't exist; egos in the lineup; fights in the car-park. These days surfing is all pain, fear and loathing ... But like any addict, I need one more fix.

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It's still raining when I step outside—a shroud of grey misty drizzle, blurring everything. “Soft rain,” the locals say. I drive through the ghostly half-light, along lonely lanes threading their way between silent stone walls. Abandoned houses loom out of the mist like ruined castles, relics of a battle with nature. There's a primal feel to this place, a majestic rawness which transcends the tourist board's description: “unspoilt”.

I round a corner and there she is. The Atlantic Ocean. Yes! Surfline got it spot on. Today's the day. Big Monday. Lines of swell are marching in and breaking across the bay with military precision. These waves have travelled thousands of miles to unload their energy here—the most westerly beach in Europe—the very edge of the continent.

This moment. This spectacle. This ocean ... It's in my blood, like a drug—salt water, not alcohol or heroin, but I'm addicted all the same. Quitting would be like going cold turkey.

I switch on the radio to drown out the black dog thoughts. It's tuned to Classic FM, a station I'd have dismissed as terminally uncool a few years ago. Now I couldn't give a damn which bunch of reality-TV wannabes are top of the pops. I don't need to know what's happening, trending, or just gone viral. I don't want to be subjected to the latest Industrial-Grime mash-up.

A rutted farm track winds through the dunes onto Gowlane strand. I leave the radio and wipers on, and gaze through the drizzle at the steely grey sea. Close up, the breakers are impressive. These are waves of consequence: powerful, unforgiving. This is a beach-break to challenge anybody.

A set rolls in and peels cleanly. The surf beckons. But as I reach for the off switch, the jagged opening chords of ‘Ziggy Stardust’ pierce the gloom. Instantly, I'm back in 1973, at the Hammersmith Odeon, watching Bowie become Ziggy for the last time ...

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He stands there, motionless, commanding the stage. Flame red hair, fluorescent make-up, flamboyant cloak. Extraterrestrial. The Spiders From Mars hit the first power chord: Kaboom! Two roadies dash from either side of the stage and rip his cloak in half, leaving him wearing a silver miniskirt, like an alien from an early episode of Star Trek. Then lift-off. The Spiders launch into ‘Space Oddity’ and we’re blasted into orbit with Major Tom.

I don’t remember much after that. Lee and I had dropped some acid and the songs all sort of merged together ... until, at the end, Bowie announced the death of his alter ego. This was the last show Ziggy would ever do. A shock wave ripped through the audience. People were in tears.

“Imagine playing a gig like this,” I yelled to Lee. “Must be better than sex.”

He grinned at me. “Yeah, that’s what I’ve been saying for the last three years, Rob. We’ve gotta find a bass player and a drummer.”

Lee and I had been messing around with guitars, writing songs together since school. Nothing too serious, just a couple of rebels looking for a cause. But Ziggy changed everything. After the gig, we dyed our hair and got a band together. Lee on lead guitar and vocals; me on rhythm guitar and (so-called) vocals; Lee’s mate, Pete Smith, played bass; and the drummer’s name was Simon Spedding, but everyone called him “Spud”. (He had a shaved head and spots like a potato, but oh boy could he play drums!) We called ourselves the Star Men, a lame reference to Bowie’s seminal song, ‘Starman’. With hindsight, it wasn’t the cleverest name for an obscure rock band, but we stuck with it through that eventful decade.

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The track ends and there’s a pause—just the wind, surf, seagulls ... and then the deejay. “David

Bowie died last night,” he announces, and instantly I know I’ll ride my last wave today. It’s one of *those* moments; one of those if-I-hadn’t-perhaps-I’d-still-be moments when time splinters and you choose which future becomes the present; one of those landmark moments.

I switch off the radio, but I can still hear the music as I rummage around the back of the van, searching for the surf wax. It takes forever. These days, rummaging through the clutter of my mind is like sifting through quicksand. But now, finally, there’s clarity, closure, an end to the angst.

I was born the same year as him, 1947, a good year for a musician to gatecrash the world. We came of age in the sixties, lit the blue touchpaper in the seventies, crashed and burned our way through the eighties and nineties, and grew old disgracefully in the new millennium.

They were good times to be a surfer too. *It’s been an endless summer*, I think, as I struggle into my ancient wetsuit and paddle out to join the locals. They nod politely. For a while we share waves and I forget about Bowie and going cold turkey. I can still just about cut it once I’m up and riding, with a style I can call my own, honed over the years. It’s about flow and timing, respecting the wave rather than shredding it.

As the sun climbs out of the dunes, a pack of punks invade the lineup. They scowl at my classic longboard, my vintage wetsuit, my bald head, my cruisey style. Respect? Forget it. But you know what? As the Sex Pistols put it: “... and We Don’t Care!”

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We were on the road for most of the seventies, Lee and I. The Star Men played hundreds of gigs. We were local heroes for our fans, but we never really made it. In the end, it was punk music that finished us. For a while, nobody listened to songs with more than two chords.

At the time, I hated the Sex Pistols—mindless thrashing around by kids who couldn't even play their instruments. Now I get it. 'Never Mind the Bollocks' resonates with me. "We Don't Care!" is a baby boomer's anthem; and it's liberating. We really *don't* care what you think of us. Why should we? The best decades were ours. What have we got to lose?

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Somewhere out in the Atlantic, the wind whips up white horses and my last wave is born. It joins a set and races east.

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I paddle deeper, distancing myself from the pack. The swell is building, and so is the crowd. A tipping-point arrives when the numbers become critical, but an unspoken code determines the pecking order: hotshots, locals, punks, grommets. There's no respect for age, but I have experience on my side.

The horizon tilts and bends as the set arrives. Geometric lines refract and converge on us. Everybody paddles furiously, clawing towards them. But I'm already in prime position. I let a couple roll through and then I spot my wave. This is the one: steep, glassy, perfect.

I paddle as hard as my protesting shoulders allow, scramble to my feet, somehow make the drop, and I'm up and running—or rather, walking—on water, for the last time ...

Weightless.

In the moment.

In the zone.

Alive!

An eerie stillness. I'm in the eye of the storm. Just the hiss of water beneath me. I trim the

board with subtle shifts and lean into a swooping bottom-turn. The board accelerates up the slope until I'm vertical, hanging under the lip, poised between a sweet top-turn and disaster. The moment lasts for a few tenths of a second, but there's a whole lifetime compressed, right there.

The flesh may be weak, but the spirit is still willing. Sex may be a memory, but this is better than sex. This is love. Utter, childlike exhilaration is tinged with grief that it'll be over all too soon.

I race down the line and as I carve through the punks, scattering them like confetti, there's a song playing in my head. Bizarrely, I'm singing "The Day the Music Died" and thinking about John Lennon.

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December 8, 1980. I'd just caught my first wave, aged thirty-four, and I was stoked. Lee was a good surfer and he'd been giving me a lesson. I was hopeless, but already helplessly addicted, a grommet surfaholic. Driving home, high on adrenaline, news of Lennon's death came on the radio and we listened in stunned silence as 'Imagine' played in memoriam. With hindsight, it was another one of those moments—another landmark moment—his death, my first wave.

The Star Men split up after that. Our fans were in tears at the end of our last gig. I was gobsmacked by how much we meant to them. Their grief reminded me of when Bowie killed off Ziggy at the Hammersmith Odeon. It brought home to me just how powerful music is; how it connects us like nothing else; how it binds us together and allows us to share these moments.

I didn't see Lee for another three decades. We went our separate ways, and for us it *was* the day the music died.

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Angry shouts from the punks as I charge through the crowded lineup, but I don't look back, "... and We Don't Care!" Some of the locals hoot as I fly past. They don't know it's my last wave, just that it's a beauty, and they celebrate in solidarity. I'm nearly in the channel now, but I hold my line to the bitter end. A last look of panic from a surfer in my path, then just white water, the shore-break, and terra firma.

So, that's that. Closure. The end of the endless summer.

Every wave-ride ends like that: a *petite mort*, an orgasm, soon forgotten. But the first and the last you ride for the rest of your life. A piece of me remains frozen in that freeze-frame moment of bitter-sweet perfection. And a few more are etched in my memory ...

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December 4, 1993. I was in Australia, surfing uncrowded reefs on the West coast, and I'd just scored some of the best waves of my life. I was forty-seven, surfing better than I ever would again. The fear and loathing were still a millennium away. Sitting in a beach bar, stoked after my best-ever session, I caught a snatch of furiously complex music.

"That sounds like Frank Zappa," I said, disbelievingly, to the barman.

"Yeah mate, he just died today."

I stared at the surf, said nothing, filed the moment away—another snapshot for the hindsight album.

Perfect sets were still rolling in. Wave after wave peaked, then crashed onto the beach, spilling their energy spectacularly. Each was unique. I'd never surf waves like these again. I felt like I did when Hendrix died: nobody would ever make music like that again.

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My teeth are rattling as I struggle out of my wetsuit. *No more freezin' bollocks and ice cream headaches*, I tell myself. *Can't say I'll miss them*. But it's a lie. I chuck my board in the back of the van and turn on the heater and the radio. They're still playing Bowie tracks—a song from the final album, released just two days ago. “There's nothing left to lose,” he sings. The voice is shaky, but unmistakably, defiantly, Bowie. I sit there listening, grieving, wondering what comes next.

The track ends. I turn off the radio. There's just the slow, steady rhythm of the surf: ebb and flow; and the seagulls' plaintive cries. I sit there for a while, watching the surfers draw lines on the cold, grey sea ... and I know I won't be back.

Driving home, shivering, I wonder how much time I have left and what I'll do with it now. It ran out for Bowie—all too soon, like my last wave. I'm numb—inside and out. Salt water drips from my sinuses, leaving a bitter, metallic taste. I turn up the heater full-blast and as I thaw out, another fragment of memory emerges: two lines from a Shakespeare sonnet. “Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore, so do our minutes hasten to their end.”

I was a student when I read those words, long before I surfed my first wave. We analysed them in my English literature class, dissecting the poem like a corpse, with an intellectual scalpel. Now, half a century later, I finally understand them, viscerally.

We are all really just waves, energy on the move, in transit between birth and death. One second there's energy and the next it's gone. The wave breaks. The energy that was David Bowie moved on. But he was still making music, reinventing himself, defiant till the end. His life is a set of timeless, forever frozen moments—landmarks, like my last top-turn.

That's the key, I think, as I leave the beach behind. *Live in the moment, not mourning that last*

ride, not afraid of the next wipeout—because who knows how many are left?

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I'm nearly home now. The rain has eased, the ocean is behind me, and the mountains are just showing through the mist. I think about the last time I saw Lee, a year ago. He asked me if I was still surfing. I said yes, while I still can, I do.

“Right. Good for you, Rob. The thing is...” He paused for a couple of beats, then he told me he had cancer and didn't have much time left.

We rolled a joint and talked about the waves we'd shared, the band, the landmark moments. We listened to some Hendrix, Bowie, Lennon, Zappa. Then we got the guitars out and struggled through some of the Star Men's old set, giggling when we couldn't remember the chords.

We talked about whether we'd want to go on living if we were paralysed from the neck down. He wasn't sure. He could handle not being able to surf, but if it meant the end of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll ... maybe not—especially if it was the end of sex.

I told him that as long as I could listen to music I'd probably want to stick around.

He frowned. “Yeah, I s'pose so. I mean, look at Dylan. He's stuck around long enough to get the Nobel Prize for literature. Who knows what I can achieve in the next few months, in between the chemo sessions?”

I grinned. “Too right, mate. That's the way to leave the stage. Like the other Dylan said: Don't go gently...”

He looked at me, nodded, and suddenly we were twenty-five again, belting out 'Starman', pink hair and mascara, a room full of kids jiving to our groove, fire in our souls.

I embraced him, waved goodbye, drove away.

It was the last time I saw Lee. The last wave.

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I'm back home now, thawed out, and the black dogs are on the run. *Going cold turkey won't be so bad*, I tell myself. *You just have to find something to replace surfing. Something without the fear and loathing.*

I get my knackered old wetsuit from the van, grab a pair of scissors, shred it, and chuck the pieces in the bin.

That's the spirit. Time to move on up. Onwards and upwards. How about paragliding? You sit down to fly those things and it ain't rocket science. Or perhaps you should just forget about this extreme sport malarkey? Yeah, you surfed to forget yourself—to forget who you really are. But now it's time to remember...

I gaze around my living room at the shelves of treasured vinyl, the framed photos of the Star Men, the vintage Gibson Les Paul, my old Vox AC30 (the amp of choice for the Beatles). I flick through the albums, find Ziggy, and stare at the iconic image on the cover. When I heard it on the radio this morning, I was wallowing in nostalgia and self-pity. Now I need some of his courage, his resilience, his ability to reinvent himself.

My twelve-string acoustic is sitting there in the corner, gathering dust, untouched for the last decade. I pick it up, stroke it like a dog that's been left unloved for too long, tune it, and tentatively strum the intro to 'Rock 'n' Roll Suicide'. It was Lee's favourite track on the album and the Star Men used to cover it. Whenever we played the song, it seemed to touch a nerve. It became a kind of manifesto for us. Lee used to joke that he'd top himself before he turned thirty—ironic, really.

The Last Wave / Richard Attree

I drift off into a bit of improvisatory noodling, allowing my fingers to rediscover long-forgotten riffs. A tune emerges. I hum it softly, then chant meaningless syllables until they become words. Eventually, tune and words coalesce into a hook. I repeat the chord sequence, allowing it to build, until I'm in full cry, stomping and hollering, belting out the chorus to the first new song I've written in ... how long? Thirty years?

I grab a pencil and scribble down the chords and lyrics on the back of an old envelope.

THE LAST WAVE—CHORUS / HOOK (Em | G | A | D)

We won't go gently, or mourn the past.

And we don't care, can't you see?

So live in the moment, cos it won't last,

And save the last wave for me.